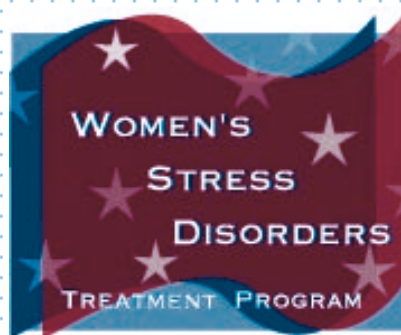


Riding out uncomfortable feelings

Creating a quiet harbor
for tough times



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Why do I get so overwhelmed by my feelings?

- ◆ Extreme stress can change body chemistry in some people
- ◆ You may never have had a chance to practice riding out feelings
- ◆ Past experience may have taught you this is the best option
- ◆ Some people are just “wired” in a way that makes them more sensitive to feelings



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People's body chemistry can change?

- When people have lived through very stressful events their nervous system may become more reactive to stress than other people's nervous systems
- This does not happen to everyone
- Even when it happens, being skillful will make that more manageable



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***You also said something
about never having
practiced***

- ➔ Yes. Sometimes people never learned how to tolerate strong feelings.
- ➔ This may be because adults were very protective of you and never wanted you to feel uncomfortable.
- ➔ Sometimes you didn't have a chance to practice because the adults around you didn't know how to do this themselves, so didn't teach you, or took it out on you.



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*Okay, that makes sense.
But how could this
have been useful?*

- For example, “falling apart” emotionally sometimes results in others coming to your rescue. Perhaps that was the only way to get attention in your family
- Problems may have felt so huge that falling apart emotionally seemed less scary than facing the problem



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How else could it have been useful?

- ◆ You may have been in a no-win situation, where you would have been punished for acknowledging what was actually happening
- ◆ Feeling things strongly may have been the only way to honor that knowledge about what was truly happening



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Why should I ride out feelings?

- Sometimes it is necessary to ride out discomfort until you are in a position to make a wise choice for the intermediate or long range
- Giving in to feelings sometimes makes a situation worse
- Some things can't be changed in the moment and the only option is to accept and tolerate them



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But isn't that being untrue to myself?

- Being true to yourself does not mean always acting on every feeling
- Feelings are important information, but they are not the only information
- We are talking about becoming skillful in taking charge of your feelings as a way to be true to your higher goals, not as a way to ignore or punish yourself for having feelings



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***So that would make
me feel better?***

- Not necessarily better immediately, but eventually.
- It's kind of like you're aiming for an oasis way across the desert that has everything you need. These skills are like dixie cups with a couple of mouthfuls of stale, tepid water. It doesn't taste good, but it makes it possible for you to travel the next little distance to the next cup of water.



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***So I won't feel better
right away***

- Probably not. These are uncomfortable skills to practice, but we're suggesting them because people with the most satisfying lives consistently use these skills to meet their goals for big picture happiness.
- Sometimes people even do things to make the situation worse, so just noticing and changing those can help, and those skills generally create less discomfort



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What do people do to make things worse?

- The most common thing is to tell themselves that the situation shouldn't be what it is. This makes you even more miserable.
- This is when you say things like, "it's not fair" or "my children should want to do the dishes".
- It is helpful to try to approach situations with acceptance of what they are.



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How would I do that?

- The first step is to decide you are willing to accept what is actually happening.
- This doesn't mean you have to like it, agree with it, or think it's fair. It only means you say to yourself, "yes, this is what's happening right now" or, "this is the hand I was dealt".



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And that will help?

Yes.

It will allow you to settle down enough emotionally to take a good look at the best ways to meet your goals.



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***Do you have an example
of how it could help me
reach my goals?***

- ◆ Lots of people feel anxious about going to the dentist. If they gave in to the feeling and avoided going to the dentist, they would have problems (cavities, dental pain) as a result
- ◆ Being true to their own best interest means accepting but not necessarily acting on those anxious feelings rather than giving in to them



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***When those feelings
are strong, it's like I
have to act on them***

- Feelings are not reality. Feeling like you need to act on something does *not* mean that you must act on something.
- Mindfulness skills are the first step in making better choices in the moment.
- The next steps are to ride out these rough waters and eventually start calming the waters by doing things that help you tolerate feelings or make the immediate moment better.



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*I guess I see why I
t could be helpful to
just ride out feelings*

- Okay.
- Let's start with skills to help you when you feel in crisis, in that feeling of ,“I have to act on this feeling” or when you're caught up in thinking, “I can't stand it”.



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***Say more about what
kind of crises you're
talking about***

- ➔ We're talking about times when it feels like your feelings are ruling you, when you feel overwhelmed by emotion.
- ➔ We are *not* talking about situations where someone is actually threatening your physical safety. In these situations the best course of action is to take steps to increase your safety.



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Okay. What skills would help me ride it out when I feel in crisis?

- One way is to distract yourself, to focus your attention elsewhere.
- There are a number of ways you might choose to distract yourself.
- For example, do a different activity.



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For example?

- ◆ If you've been sitting in your home feeling stuck in a particular feeling, try doing something different.
- ◆ Take a walk, do a jigsaw puzzle, wash your kitchen floor, sing show tunes - any activity that helps change your focus can work, but do something that is not harmful (playing cards with friends would work, going to a bar for a drink would not).



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Any other healthy ways to distract myself?

- Physical activity is particularly effective because of the positive effects physical activity has on both depression and anxiety.
- As with anything, “too much of a good thing” can backfire, so be moderate. An hour or even two is probably fine. Six hours is too much of a good thing.



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What else?

- Do something for someone else.
- This could include making cookies for a neighbor, folding laundry for your family, picking up litter in a nearby park, stuffing envelopes or making phone calls for an organization you believe in, picking up a few groceries for an ill neighbor.
- It doesn't need to be anything big, just focused on someone else's needs.



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Are there other ways to distract myself?

- ➔ It sometimes works to compare your experience with someone else's.
- ➔ Most people have experience doing this in an *unhelpful* way, which we'd call envy.
- ➔ We are suggesting you compare your situation with someone who is *worse* off.
- ➔ For example, noticing someone who cannot walk because of polio can remind you that even people who have it worse can get through tough times.



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***That sounds like I
don't deserve to
feel how I feel***

- ◆ Remember this is an emergency strategy, not a long term solution
- ◆ We're not talking about what's right or "deserved", but rather about what is effective in riding out this particular moment in time



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Okay. What else?

- ◆ Momentarily leaving the situation you are in can sometimes help because you are not surrounded by reminders of your stresses.
- ◆ Thinking about other things can also work. This is the Scarlet O'Hara approach: "I'll think about it tomorrow".
- ◆ Use intense sensations. You could hold ice cubes in your hand or do any activity that helps you focus on physical sensations that are not associated with stress.



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How do I get myself to think about other things?

- This definitely takes practice.
- A good place to start might be noticing where you are without pain.
- You might start by saying, “At least I can.....” and then fill in the blank (“at least I can walk, at least I can listen to music, at least I can breathe”).



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Any more ideas about distracting myself?

- ◆ You might want to look at Marsha Linehan's "Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder".
- ◆ She has very practical suggestions anyone can use to better cope in stressful situations.



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***Are there ways besides
distracting myself
that work?***

Yes.

**Take a look at the modules on
“Improving this Moment”,
“Comforting Yourself”, and
“Mindfulness”.**



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